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Interview highlights

DHS official defends Mahmoud Khalil arrest, but offers few details on why it happened

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HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

By Michel Martin, Destinee Adams

5-Minute Listen

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TRANSCRIPT



Troy Edgar testifies during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on February 25, 2025.

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

President Trump has ramped up efforts to deliver on a campaign promise to carry out the largest ever deportation of immigrants in U.S. history.

Parallel to those deportation plans is a crackdown on what the administration calls antisemitism on college campuses.

Both efforts came to the forefront this week when Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers arrested Mahmoud Khalil, a recent Columbia University graduate student, who has not been charged with any crime yet. This is likely the first high profile arrest of a legal permanent resident in connection with the pro-Palestinian protests that rippled across the nation's campuses last year. Trump has vowed that this is the first of many arrests to come as he lays a framework for

increased deportations. Trump officials are standing beside his efforts and doubling down on accusations that Khalil's actions align with those of a terrorist.

One of those officials is Troy Edgar, the deputy secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, who defended Khalil's arrest on *Morning Edition*. When NPR's Michel Martin asked him to explain what Khalil did to be arrested, aligned with terrorist activity and potentially deported, Edgar did not give a clear answer.

"I think you can see it on TV, right?" Edgar said. "We've invited and allowed the student to come into the country, and he's put himself in the middle of the process of basically pro-Palestinian activity. And at this point, like I said, the Secretary of State can review his visa process at any point and revoke it."

Khalil, a Syrian national of Palestinian descent, does not have a U.S. visa of any kind. Therefore an immigration judge would be the one to decide whether or not his status is revoked, not administration officials. He does however hold a green card, making him a lawful permanent resident in the U.S.

Khalil participated in pro-Palestine student protests at Columbia University last year, and he also negotiated with the administration on behalf of students pushing for the university to divest from Israel because of its war in Gaza against Hamas.

After his arrest, Khalil was taken to a detention center in Louisiana. Though ICE officers said that his green card was revoked, U.S. District Judge Jesse M. Furman ordered he cannot be deported while the court weighs a legal challenge brought by his lawyers.

The day before Khalil's arrest, Edgar was sworn into his new position with the Department of Homeland Security. During Trump's first term, Edgar served as the department's chief financial officer.

Edgar spoke to Martin about Mahmoud Khalil's arrest and the Trump administration's ramped-up deportations of migrants.

The following excerpt has been edited for length and clarity.

Interview highlights

Michel Martin: Mahmoud Khalil says he acted as a spokesperson for pro-Palestinian demonstrators and as a mediator with Columbia University, where he was a graduate student. As you know, Mr. Edgar, any conduct that can be legally sanctioned must be described. So, what is the specific conduct the government alleges that Mr. Khalil engaged in that merits removal from the United States.

Troy Edgar: I think what you saw there is you've got somebody that has come into the country on a visa. And as he's going through the visa process, he is coming in to basically be a student that is not going to be supporting terrorism. So, the issue is he was let into the country on this visa. He has been promoting this antisemitism activity at the university. And at this point, the State Department has revoked his visa for supporting a terrorist type organization. And we're the enforcing agencies, so we've come in to basically arrest him.

Martin: A White House official told the Free Press that there's no allegation that he broke any laws. So, again, I have to ask, what specifically constitutes terrorist activity that he was supporting? What exactly do you say he did?

Edgar: Well, like I said, when you apply for a visa, you go through the process to be able to say that you're here on a student visa, that doesn't afford you all the rights of coming in and basically going through this process, agitating and supporting Hamas. So, at this point, yeah, the Secretary of State and the State Department maintains the right to revoke the visa, and that's what they've done.

Martin: How did he support Hamas? Exactly what did he do?

Edgar: Well, I think you can see it on TV, right? This is somebody that we've invited and allowed the student to come into the country, and he's put himself in

the middle of the process of basically pro-Palestinian activity. And at this point, like I said, the Secretary of State can review his visa process at any point and revoke it.

Martin: He's a permanent resident. He's not a visa holder. He's a legal permanent resident. He has the green card, at least he did, until it's alleged that it was revoked.

If the allegation is that Mr. Khalil organized protests and made speeches after which other people engaged in prohibited activity, or, say, violent activity. Well, Mr. Trump gave a political speech on January 6, 2021, after which some individuals engaged in violent and illegal acts. How is this any different?

Edgar: President Trump's a citizen and the president of the United States. This is a person that came in under a visa. And again, the secretary of state at any point can take a look and evaluate that visa and decide if they want to revoke it.

Martin: He's a legal permanent resident. I have to keep insisting on that. He is a legal permanent resident.

So what is the standard? Is any criticism of the Israeli government a deportable offense?

Edgar: Like I said, I think that at this point when he entered into the country on a student visa, at any point we can go through and evaluate what his status is.

Martin: Is any criticism of the United States government a deportable offense?

Edgar: Like I said, if you go through the process and you're a student and you're here on a visa and you go through it, at any point ...

Martin: Is any criticism of the government a deportable offense?

Edgar: Let me put it this way, Michel, imagine if he came in and filled out the form and said, 'I want a student visa.' They asked him, 'What are you going to do here?' And he says, 'I'm going to go and protest.' We would have never let him into the country.

Martin: Is protesting a deportable offense?

Edgar: You're focused on protests. I'm focused on the visa process. He went through a legal process ...

Martin: Are you saying he lied on his application? He's a lawful permanent resident, married to an American citizen.

Edgar: I think if he would have declared he's a terrorist, we would have never let him in.

Martin: And what did he engage in that constitutes terrorist activity?

Edgar: I mean, Michel, have you watched it on TV? It's pretty clear.

Michel: No, it isn't. Well, explain it to those of us who have not or perhaps others have not. What exactly did you do?

Edgar: Well, I think it's clear or we wouldn't be talking about it. I mean, the reality is that if you watch and see what he's done on the university ...

Martin: Do you not know? Are you telling us that you're not aware?

Edgar: I find it interesting that you're not aware.

Martin: I think you could explain it to us. I think others would like to know exactly what the offenses are, what the propaganda was that you allege, what the activity was that you allege. Well, perhaps we can talk again and you can give us more details about this.

We really appreciate your coming to join us, and we do hope we'll talk again.

Edgar: Thank you.

This story was edited by Kristian Monroe. Ximena Bustillo contributed to this story.